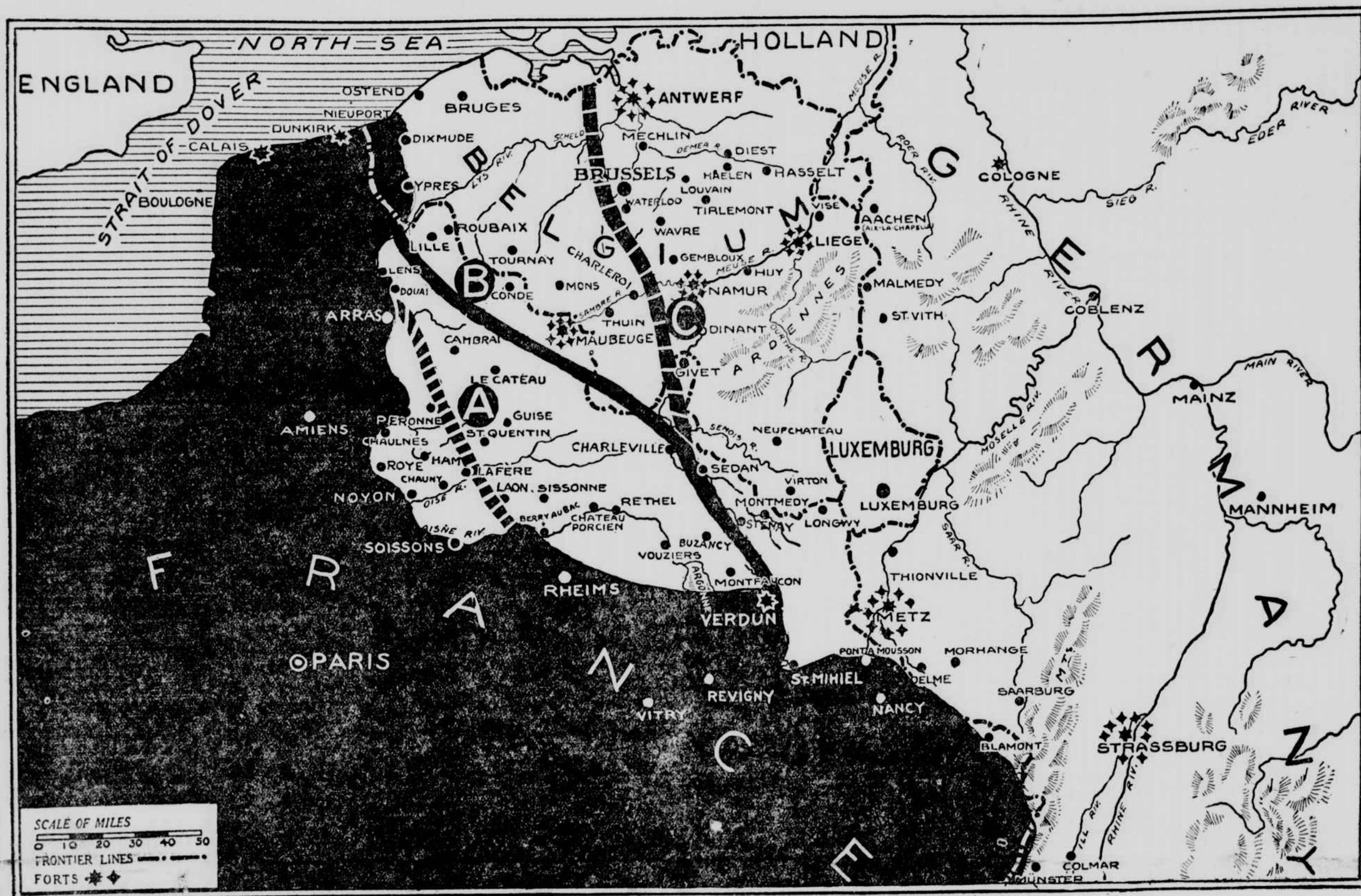


## WILL GERMANY SHORTEN HER LINES IN THE WEST?



THE WESTERN FRONT.

Black shows country now occupied by the Allies.

B—Lille-Mézières (Charleville) position.

Second reserve line of defence.

C—Antwerp-Brussels-Namur-Mézières (Charleville) position.

Third reserve line of defence.

A—Arras-Cambrai-St. Quentin position.

First reserve line of defence.

By FRANK H. SIMONDS,  
Author of "The Great War."

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Unless all signs fail, the moment is almost at hand when the Germans must shorten their lines on the Western front. After nearly two years, in which the long trench lines have endured with little change from Switzerland to the sea, the time has come when all Allied and neutral observers agree that a considerable change is imminent. And even in German comment there has been plain evidence that some change is expected.

This change is viewed in different ways by various observers. Roughly speaking, there are two sets of views. Not a few well informed military critics insist that the change will be a radical one; that it will mean the evacuation of practically all of Northern France, a retreat either to a line running from Verdun behind the Meuse as far as Mézières (Charleville) and thence northwest to Lille along the Franco-Belgian frontier, or else behind the Meuse as far as Namur and thence northwestward, covering Brussels and reaching the Scheldt south of Antwerp.

## Perhaps a Limited Retirement.

The second view is that the retirement will be wholly limited and will amount to the surrender of the territory in the famous Noyon "elbow" or salient. If this latter view is correct, we shall presently see the German front withdrawn until the line passes southeast from Arras or even Lens to Laon, covering the cities of Douai, Cambrai and St. Quentin and resting on the old forts of La Fère, from which point it will go southeast to meet the present line before Laon and east of Soissons.

To support their contention that the retreat will be to the Meuse and the French frontier or even to the Antwerp-Meuse-Mézières line, the military observers who hold this opinion bring forward the following arguments: First of all they point out that the Germans and their Austrian allies have lost since February not less than 1,500,000 killed, wounded and prisoners, the prisoners alone amounting to 500,000. To replace this huge loss must strain their recruiting and training machinery to the utmost, even if there is still a plentiful supply of men. This last assumption is disputed, and evidence is produced to show that the Germans in some small degree and the Austrians to a considerable degree are revealing the

growing shortage of men which is the first sign of inevitable defeat. Having to find 1,500,000 to replace casualties, the Germans and their allies have also to find not less than 250,000 to meet the new Rumanian thrust. In other words, if Germany is merely to hold her ground she and her allies must find 1,750,000 new soldiers; must, in fact, have found the major part of them already in the days since the attack on Verdun, which cost 500,000 casualties, actually began.

## Now Too Few Men.

This many believe to be impossible. In other words, they assert that Germany is now holding all her lines with too few men; that in doing this she is running very grave risks and that she will soon have to decide whether she will retire to shorter lines or invite disaster where she stands.

Now, if Germany is to shorten her lines there can be no question as to the front that can be most safely sacrificed. To retreat in the East would bring a lengthening not a shortening of the front, unless Germany retired to her own East Prussian frontier and risked a new Cosack incursion. This is due to the nature of the country now occupied, since the Pripiet Marshes supply a large area that can be lightly held and do not offer any opportunity for attack.

As to any sacrifice in the Balkans, this is impossible, because it means the elimination of Bulgaria, whose statesmen would change sides at the first sign of German weakness; it means the loss of communication with the Turk, the eventual collapse of Turkish resistance and the freeing of the Straits. When the Straits are opened Russia can be munitioned at once, and the millions of Russians now waiting for guns equipped and set in motion on the road to Berlin.

Turning from theory to fact, we have seen recently that the entrance of Rumania had for an immediate consequence the dispatch of Mackensen to the Balkans and a quick Teuto-Turk-Bulgar thrust up into the Dobruja, designed to reassure the Turks and Bulgars, protect the Berlin-Constantinople Railroad and threaten Rumania. No possibility exists of shortening the line in the Balkans without losing Turkish and Bulgar assistance, and Germany cannot surrender either the military or political advantages she has ac-

quired in the Balkans except in the presence of perils greater than those yet in view.

But to go back behind the Meuse and thence along the French frontier, or even behind the Verdun-Mézières-Namur-Brussels-Antwerp line, would give Germany at once a far more advantageous position than she now holds over much of her Western front and a line upward of a hundred miles shorter than her present front from Verdun to Nieupoort. And on the political side, while most Germans still expect to hold the Polish conquests and keep the road to Constantinople open, the time has passed when many expect to keep any portion of France or Belgium. If Germany is running short of men, if she feels the immediate need of an army of 250,000 men, and cannot find them in her own depots, then it is clear that she can find them only by shortening her Western front, but that by such a shortening she would release the requisite number of men and strengthen her Western front at the same time.

This is the case of those who expect a general retreat in a short time, before the first of the year at the latest. Now, on the other side, the case for the far more restricted retreat is this: First of all, the recent Allied advances have made the position of the Germans in the Noyon "elbow," the whole German position from Péronne right around to Soissons, increasingly difficult, without yet being actually perilous. It will need only a few more such advances as the last two of Foch to make the withdrawal from this salient imperative.

Look at the map, and you will see that as the French and British advance east from their present positions they advance across the roads which feed the German positions at Chaulnes, at Roye, at Noyon and opposite Soissons. The Allies are, in effect, carrying a noose around the neck of this salient, narrowing the neck steadily and restricting the number of roads and railroads by which the Germans can munition and provision their troops. The objective of the French is St. Quentin, some twenty miles east of their present front. But long before they get to St. Quentin their guns will cut the roads leading south out of St. Quentin, and it is upon these roads that the Germans in Noyon, Roye and Chaulnes depend for their existence.

## Gnawing Lengthens the Line.

Exactly the same thing on a smaller scale is taking place in the bulge between Arras and Péronne. About Péronne the French are more than ten miles further east than the Germans before Bapaume, and the British already have under their guns all the roads which lead out of Bapaume and are essential for the supply of troops holding the front west of this

town. Actually, the Allied operation consists in a process of gnawing right across the rear of the German positions, cutting one after another of the roads and railroad upon which they depend.

One interesting and important consequence of this gnawing process is that as it proceeds it lengthens the German line. Instead of a comparatively straight front, their line takes the form of a concave front, deepening all the time as the Allies drive more and more into it. This extension of the lines requires more men to defend them, and the lines themselves, in many cases emergency trenches, are weaker than the original front. Thus, today the German lines in the Péronne sector are probably a dozen or fifteen miles longer than they were at the start.

It is necessary to emphasize the fact that the Germans in the Noyon "elbow" are not yet in any immediate danger of envelopment. The neck of their salient between Péronne and the Oise east of St. Quentin, is still twenty-five miles wide; it was more than thirty at the start. But some of the roads have been actually cut, and for five miles beyond the present front the roads are under fire of the Allied guns and cannot be used without grave peril. This means growing congestion in the neck of the salient. It means corresponding difficulty in handling munitions and supplies, and it forecasts a day when the further advance of the Allies, an advance of not more than ten miles at the most, will make the evacuation of this Noyon "elbow" inevitable.

## May Hang on Yet.

The chances of an ultimate envelopment of the Germans in the Noyon salient, unless there is an actual piercing of the lines about Péronne and a sudden rush of a huge French attacking force, are not very great. A year ago the Russian retreat demonstrated the extreme difficulty of enveloping large forces by similar operations. It remains perfectly possible for the Germans to hang on for some weeks yet if the Allies do not greatly increase their rate of advance. But even their present rate of advance cannot fail to make the Noyon salient untenable before winter.

The same is true of the smaller Bapaume salient, north of Péronne. This is a much worse situation now than the southern position of Noyon. Bapaume is under British fire, and if the British are able presently to take Comblès and bring their front east on a level with the French, it will no longer be possible for the Germans to use Bapaume as a centre for supplying their troops between Arras and Péronne.

Now, the advances of the British and the French in the past few days, the diminishing intensity of German counter-attacks and the growing frankness of Berlin of-

ficial statements in conceding the loss of villages, not tardily, as at first, but promptly, all point toward a decision on the part of German high command to "cut their losses" in this sector, to hold on to the last possible moment, take as large a toll as is possible of their opponents, but to retire at the final moment rather than to counter-attack, as the French did in the critical hours before Verdun.

It is not possible to forecast the extent of a probable German retreat. There never may be anything like a general retreat. We may continue to see changes of themselves slight, for many days or weeks. Yet it is clear that in certain sectors even this limited retreating will ultimately compel retirements in adjoining sectors to keep the alignment. This is why so many writers have already decided that the Germans will stand on the Arras-Cambrai-St. Quentin-La Fère-Laon line. Such a retirement would again give the Germans a line substantially straight; it would abolish all perils to their communications and it would shorten the front, which has been lengthened and will be still more lengthened if the Allied gnawing goes on for a few more weeks.

If they are not exceedingly short of men the Germans will not make a general retreat. They will not do this because the moral effect at home would be considerable and in France it would be tremendous. It would be the assurance of final victory, for it would be practically the liberation of France, and Germany would no longer have a single hold upon the French which might serve as the basis for bargaining when the time comes to discuss peace.

But, in addition, if the Germans retire fighting over every mile the result will be the total destruction of the country over which they retreat, and the German commanders plainly reckon that the French people will presently weary of having all their northern country turned into a desert and a waste, and the same ruin overtake Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing, St. Quentin and Laon which has overtaken Arras, Soissons, Rheims and Verdun.

## Not a Minor Change.

If you are to believe one school of commentators, and they have a strong appeal to credence, the Germans have actually reached the point where their reserves are exhausted. Mr. Hilaire Belloc is the best exponent of this view, and he presents weekly interesting evidence to support it. This is the French view, the view of the French officers, from Joffre down, the view that Joffre has recently expressed both publicly and in private talks with Americans, who have repeated his word to me.

In the opinion of these men Germany has no more men immediately available and will have few men before next spring.

when the class of 1918 will be available. Now, if this view of the French staff is correct, and it is naturally based upon a very wide range of information and evidence, there will be a shortening of the German lines in the West before winter, and it will not be a minor change; it will be a retirement far behind the present front and the evacuation of all of France.

Again, if the Germans are as short of men as the French General Staff believes, then there may be an actual disaster when the retreat begins. This is what happened to Lee before Richmond. He held on with insufficient numbers long after his military judgment counselled a retreat, because political considerations prevented the abandonment of the Confederate capital. One of the best informed of my correspondents recently expressed the belief that a general German retreat would cost 100,000 prisoners and a colossal loss of guns and material.

Later reports from the Somme front, particularly from the French side, state that the German lines have been actually pierced at certain points and that there have been operations recalling the old fighting in the open before the end of the Marne campaign. But, on the other hand, I have been informed from Paris that aerial observation has disclosed that the Germans have constructed trench lines, one behind the other, for a very great distance, and that there is no chance that these lines will be pierced.

## Think Allied Losses Too Great.

On the German side there is a natural insistence that there is no shortage of men; this would be the statement in any case. There is the more convincing assertion that the Germans believe that the Allied losses are so great that the French and British will have to give up their attacks before they actually make any substantial progress, because of the cost. We know that the first two months of the attack cost the British upward of 200,000 casualties, and it is fair to estimate that September will cost at least 150,000 more. But Germany alone reported 250,000 casualties last month, and German effectives now cannot be more numerous than British, because of the very much greater German losses, 3,250,000 according to official German statistics.

Unless the German calculations are correct, and the cost of the operation is beyond the resources of France and Britain, we are soon to see some retirement in the West. It will be great or small, as German human resources and the conditions in the Balkans and in Hungary and Galicia determine. Two or three weeks at the most should tell the story as far as the Noyon and Bapaume salients are concerned. If the Allies ultimately get Cambrai and St. Quentin, then the retirement will have to be

very great, and it will have to be to the frontier or to the Antwerp-Meuse line. But St. Quentin and Cambrai are more than twenty miles away now, and twenty miles is a tremendous distance in trench warfare.

It is fair to say, however, that the Allied offensive on the Somme has already proved the most successful effort of the sort on the Western front. It has far exceeded the Verdun operation in progress, and, unlike the Verdun operation, it is showing evidences of greater power at the close of the third month than it did at the end of the first. The gains in recent days have been unprecedented, and they have disclosed a permanent or temporary weakness on the part of the Germans which has taken the world by surprise.

## The Crisis for Austria.

In the long run the operations in the East and the South are likely to have a more immediate influence upon the progress of the war than those in the West, because the Germans are fighting far within Allied territory, while in the East the Russians are in Galicia and hold all of Bukovina, and the Rumanians have occupied as much of Hungary as Germany holds of France. Finally, the defeat of the Bulgars in Macedonia would bring about the immediate isolation of Bulgaria and Turkey and the complete encirclement of the remaining Central Powers.

To-day the real problem is not the change in front on the West, but the capacity of Austria to endure another year of the war. It is against Austria that the main blows are being directed, and the Western campaign has for its prime objective keeping Germany occupied on this front and preventing the dispatch of German troops to Hungary, Galicia or Bulgaria. The actual occupation of territory is, beside this purpose, unimportant. Not land taken but Germans killed, captured or wounded—this is the immediate concern of the Allies in the West; and it would be a mistake to attach much importance to incidental gains in Picardy, up to the point where these incidental gains combine to compel a general retreat which will be a confession of growing weakness and of failing resources in man power.

Meantime it is well to await the conclusion of the Western campaign, keeping in mind the prediction of the well-informed French General Staff that by January 1 the Germans will have been compelled to retreat on a wide front and evacuate most of their French conquests, held now for more than two years. If this takes place then it will be fair to conclude that Germany is suffering from a rapid decline in her human resources; so far all signs point that way, but none of them are yet conclusive.